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A DISCUSSION OF MR. FENOLLOSA'S THEORY OF ART DEVELOPMENT AND ITS RELATION TO CERTAIN PROBLEMS OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

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In his lecture on "The Structural Basis of Art"[1] Mr. Fenollosa presents a view of art evolution strikingly at variance with that commonly accepted. In stating his thesis he says:

> It has been held by some people in America, and I think it is held by the majority of the public, that the real root of art development and of art power lies in representation. That is the old orthodox view. . . . . All the histories of art that exist assert that it is the development of more and more perspective, more and more elements of realistic impression, that constitute the arts in our time. What I wish to say is that this is not true in the history of human art.

Enlarging upon this theory, he adds:

> The proposition I am going to make is that the real power of man over the elements of art structure comes, not from the representative element, but from the structural element; that it comes from what we do with material things in their actual human and social uses — textiles, clay, wood, stone, metal — all of these substances; and what renders their human forms agreeable to us is the application of pattern to them, if you like.

Again he states:

> What has made the finer and finer line from the realistic side of the drawing is not the realistic motive, but the desire to find finer and finer space-relations and line-relations. . . . . In other words, I would hold that the realistic development grows out of the desire for the finer and finer decorative motive.

In his slides Mr. Fenollosa drew from a range of material that included the most typical phases of art development. It is a pity that this most convincing part of his argument could not accompany the stenographic report of the lecture.

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[1] See Ernest Fenollosa, "Fine Arts," *Elementary School Teacher*, September, 1904.

This theory of art evolution marks out for an educational system a line of development in control quite different from the old ones. It makes the æsthetic element a dominant factor from the beginning. It places at least a slight emphasis at once upon the elements of visual art, viz., line, dark and light, and color.

Concerning the art-growth of the individual, I should like to ask the question: How is it possible for the realistic development to grow out of a desire for the finer and finer decorative motives; and, if so, how would it modify present conditions? The graphic arts interpret to the eye through symbols of images, visually derived. Artistic development requires the continuous growth of adequate visual power. The danger is great of the child's acquiring a number of symbols which by constant repetition without growth become automatic and end in arrested development.

The world that makes itself known to us through the eye may primarily be one of color. Color, however, as an attribute of matter, is subject to limitations of form and space. Hence one may compare the world of vision to a color mosaic. Through the variations of matter some shapes are dark, some are light, some are of one hue and others of another. By correctly defining color limits one also defines form and space. A receding road appears as a wedge-shaped area related in certain definite ways to other shapes. The distant objects of a landscape appear as color shapes, less intense than near details, but still as clearly defined areas. The third dimension is everywhere evident through the variations of light and dark shapes, and through the spaces into which it is cutting surrounding areas. To interpret in terms of the visual, things must be perceived as if one were looking through a window or at a mirror on which the subject is projected. Children often see color and yet render it as a formless mass. We all know the child who covers his paper with a smudge of red paint and calls it an apple. It is only after he has reinforced the notion of its color by his sense of the feeling of the apple that he can completely define his image. It would seem, therefore, that to be a perfect visualist would be to possess perfect co-ordination of visual and motor sense. I apply the term "visualist" to people from whom seeing stimulates a response in terms of color shapes. I have found about one child out of thirty to react in this way. Seeing with the others is so imperfect that it serves merely to present to the mind a symbol of a motor experience. These motor images seem to get in the way of a direct visual impression. We know from such experience that a road is miles in length, and that it is on a flat plane. We know that the table has thickness. It is impossible for the majority of people to forget these facts, or to relate them properly to others, and to see these things as projections.

I have tried to indicate that if there is to be continuous growth through art-expression, the child must become more and more conscious of these visual facts. Attention must in some way be directed to variations of tone, to variations of size, and to variations of shape. Here is the weak point in past methods, both pedagogic and unpedagogic. Between the years of six and twelve the increase in the power of seeing is not usually proportionate to the development along other lines. When the art element has been omitted, one of two interests has usually been depended upon: either the interest in things and their correct representation, or the interest in idea and its expression. Is the weakness due to this fact? Very imperfect and conventional symbols serve to call up associated ideas. Measured by a standard which makes expression of ideas the only aim, the child's crudest effort is adequate. A line at the top of the paper for sky, and one at the bottom for ground, express perfectly his notion of the distance between earth and sky. The desire to express idea alone does not afford the key to legitimate interest in space-art.

In Fig. 1 of the iris I have attempted to indicate by dotted lines a few of the many comparisons which would be made by the draftsman in the process of making an accurate drawing from the plant, when attention is focused entirely upon the problem of representation. First, the form of the group as a whole is noted, as if inclosed in Fig. *A, B, C,D, E.* The proportion of height and width of the group is determined by comparison of *CF* and *DG.* The position of *E* is determined by its vertical relation to *AC,* as at *K.* The whole is next broken up into its most important subordinate parts. The shape of the flower is defined as *CDNLM.*

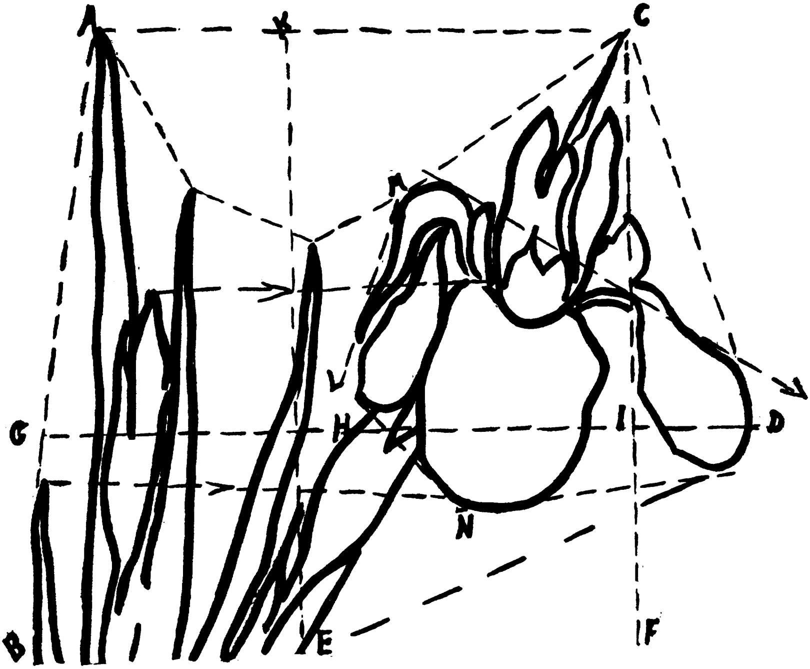

Fig. 1

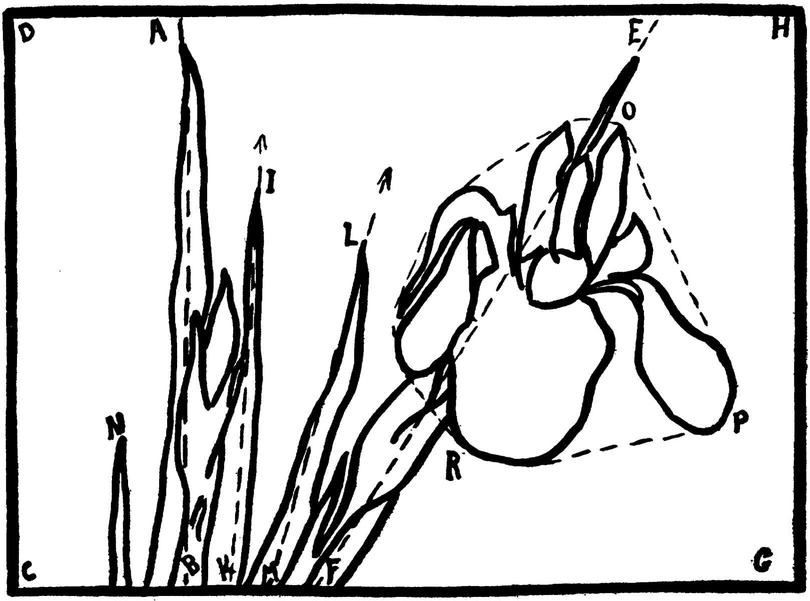

Fig. 2

The width of the flower *DH* is compared to the length of the line *CF*. This process of relating one set of details to another by noting common direction and relative proportions is followed till the minutest parts are accurately placed. This process is deductive, and is fitted only to a mature mind. It is a power not gained, without great loss of energy, much before the fifteenth year. It is the method by which the average art student sits down with plumb-line and spends weeks in laborious analysis of the immovable cast. It is the method which belongs pre-eminently to a period of conscious study and analysis. It is neither the process by which the child interprets naïvely his imperfect impressions, nor is it the method by which the artist who has mastered his processes, till they have once more become unconscious or instinctive, interprets the ever-changing phenomena of living things. Owing to the inability of the young mind to make the close analysis of form which is indicated in the illustration, when we concentrate the attention upon things and their representation, we are holding up a standard which is beyond the child's mental powers. Moreover, it is a question whether, if it were not so, in the desire to reproduce an object merely, there would in early years arise a motive strong enough to make him try to master so much drudgery. While they are not capable of close analysis, children of ten are conscious of result as result. Measured by a standard which makes representation the highest aim, their efforts must seem inadequate. Hence artistic activities end too often in dissatisfaction and disgust at a period when they would be most beneficial as emotional safety-valves. One naturally questions whether it be possible that there would normally occur a chasm so wide that development would practically be suspended. In the Laboratory school we found that this break did not occur in the crafts. In the case of the textiles which were most thoroughly organized and developed, the interest in the decorative side of the work grew constantly. At about twelve years this interest finally emerged from the central activity to the extent of abstract exercises in design. In these exercises the children formulated their experiences in the decoration of specific articles, and realized these experiences as illustrations of large principles of composition and design. Observation of this and other evidences of æsthetic interest led to the belief that the delight in producing arrangements of form and colors finally took the place of the earlier story-interest. The study of naturalistic symbols in the later period hinged on the desire to organize them into a whole which should be beautiful. While we instinctively responded to this need through the close observance of the children, its real significance was not fully appreciated till viewed in the light of this theory of art evolution.

How can the attention be legitimately carried through the representation of things to the representation of spaces? Mr. Fenollosa answers: Through the desire to find finer and finer space-relations. In Fig. 2 I have indicated, as far as possible, the process of drawing the iris from this point of view. First the attention is directed to the rectangle *CDHG*. What are the characteristic lines of the iris? How can the rectangle be cut by these so as to procure a beautiful division of spaces, and a unified result? *AB* and *EF* become leading lines, interpreting the plant characteristic and placed so as to divide the rectangle into three finely proportioned areas—*ABCD, ABEF,* and *EFHG.* We next consider the enrichmnet of the three areas. The eye is carried over the smallest space *ABCD,* which is related to the others by the one small leaf-shaped *N.* The central space *ABEF* is enriched by two leaf-shapes cutting it into three background spaces very harmoniously related to the leaf and petal forms. The space *EFHG* is united to the rest of the rectangle by the extension of the flower into the triangular space *OPR,* which cuts *EFHG* into three very nearly equal areas. I would call attention to the fact that in the effort to gain rhythm and balance, laws of order and beauty, the mind has been called to consider background spaces. Now, if the reader will attempt to focus his eye on spaces *ABCD, ABEF,* and *EFGH,* he will find that it is easy to retain an image of these, and by so doing he could draw the leaf *A* and stem *EF.* By noting the background spaces into which leaves *A, I,* and *L* divide the middle area, he will soon be able to image more in detail this space, and could place correctly these leaves. In the same way, by noting the relations of the three figures *ORP, FRPG,* and *POEH,* he could locate the flower. In other words, out of the art-interest has developed this power of seeing.

Children do not draw by continual reference to the subject. They draw from the image. The image is of some kind of a whole, or of a symbol which stands for the whole. The only process by which they can break up a whole into its parts, and render the parts in their correct interrelations, is by seeing the parts as lesser wholes. Hence I ask: Would the interest in objects as elements in the problem of space decoration develop a more complete power of imagery?

The work of Arthur W. Dow is familiar to everyone. He was the first to adapt art education to the theory of evolution advanced by Mr. Fenollosa. Those who see in it only an attempt to teach composition naturally wonder at its being regarded as a new point of view. If there were anything new in the laws of graphic composition, they would not be the universal laws which they are — laws as old in their manifestations as the human race. The newness lies in the attempt to develop realism out of the process of obtaining structural beauty. In the case of adults Mr. Dow has pretty clearly proved that it can be done.

Fig. 3 reproduces a set of designs made by a student in the College. These were the working out of purely æsthetic problems.

In Fig. 4 the lower left-hand drawing of landscape was the first attempt of the same student to sketch from nature.

Fig. 5 is a set of studies in composition. The original drawing from the subject is seen in the upper right-hand corner. The others are variations of the original, made for the purpose of abstracting line and dark and light as elements of space-art. These were the student's introduction to the subject of free-hand drawing. The remaining studies in Fig. 6 are the same student's first attempts at rendering nature. In all of these, the consciousness of background shapes, gained by the design and composition, aided them in seeing more readily.

I would have no one think that such abstractions as these should be presented to children. We must in no way interfere with their spontaneous impulses.

In all questions relating to organizations of art-work in elementary education, let us accept as a settled fact that no motive artificially imposed upon the child will result in real art expression. We may conclude that the child is stimulated to such expression by practically as strong elemental impulses as the race, viz., the story-telling, or, as Mr. Fenollosa calls it, the literary motive and the decorative.[2]

I have not intended to cast any doubt upon either of these motives as an initial stimulus. My question is wholly concerning the kind of control which it is possible to develop out of the satisfaction of these impulses. If we can assure ourselves that children naturally respond to æsthetic impulses, then we may feel safe in undertaking their development by gradually placing emphasis upon the art elements, and by so doing gain the visual power essential to continuous expression.

It has been clearly indicated that a sense of orderliness in the use of symbols constitutes the art side of the work. Do children show this? Here is a wide field for careful experimentation.

Fig. 6 represents a set of portfolios which children five and a half years old made to hold a set of nature records. To furnish some unifying element for the design, the children were limited to units symbolizing nature. Leaves were given them to arrange in any way they liked. They combined these leaves or used them singly. A pattern which they drew and cut from the natural leaves enabled them more freely to express their natural sense of order or disorder, as the case might be. Through difficulty in controlling their medium, the units in process of repetition lost their original form. No. 1 it will be seen, is a balanced composition. No. 2 was intersting in its development. The circle of leaves was the child's first idea. He colored these green. Not quite satisfied, he put a spot of red in the middle, and then seemed to feel the need of balancing that, and added the large circle of red paint around the outside of the leaves. In No. 3 the boy has put his name. He started it too far over, and rather than

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[2] See the discussion of this in "Principles of Education as Applied to Art," *Elementary School Record,* February, 1900; "Elementary Art Teaching in the Laboratory School," *Elementary School Teacher,* June and September, 1903; and "Æsthetic Development the Problem of the Future," *ibid.,* March, 1904.

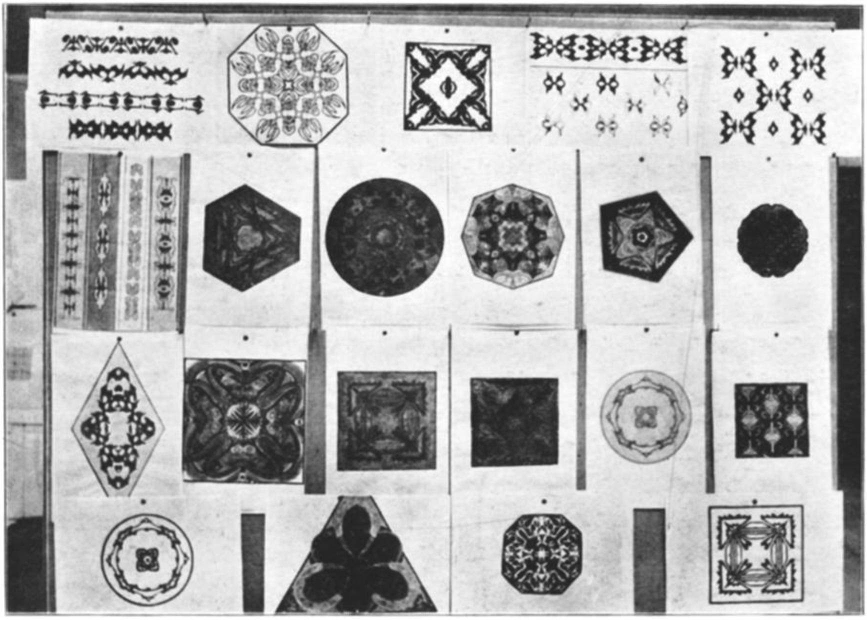

FIG. 3

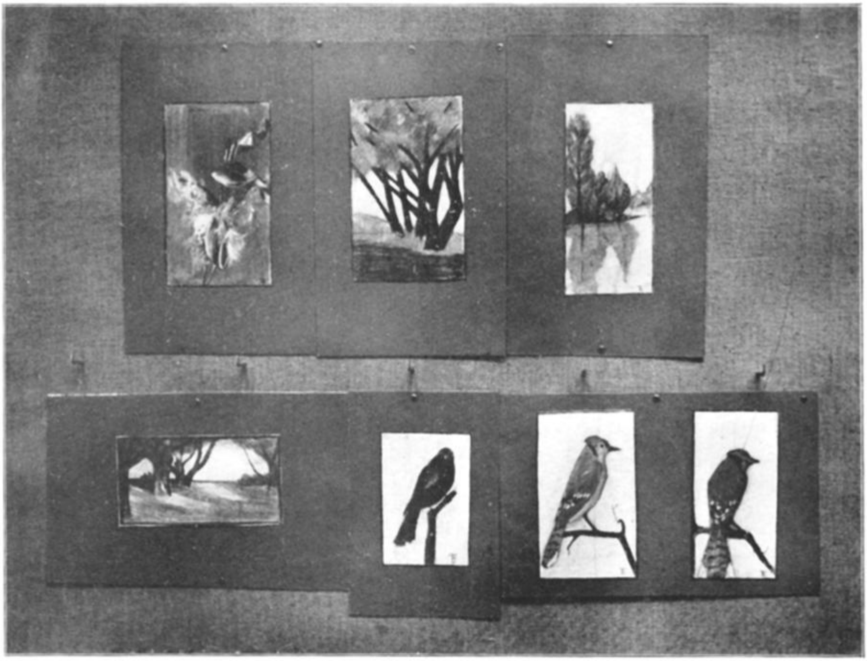

FIG. 4

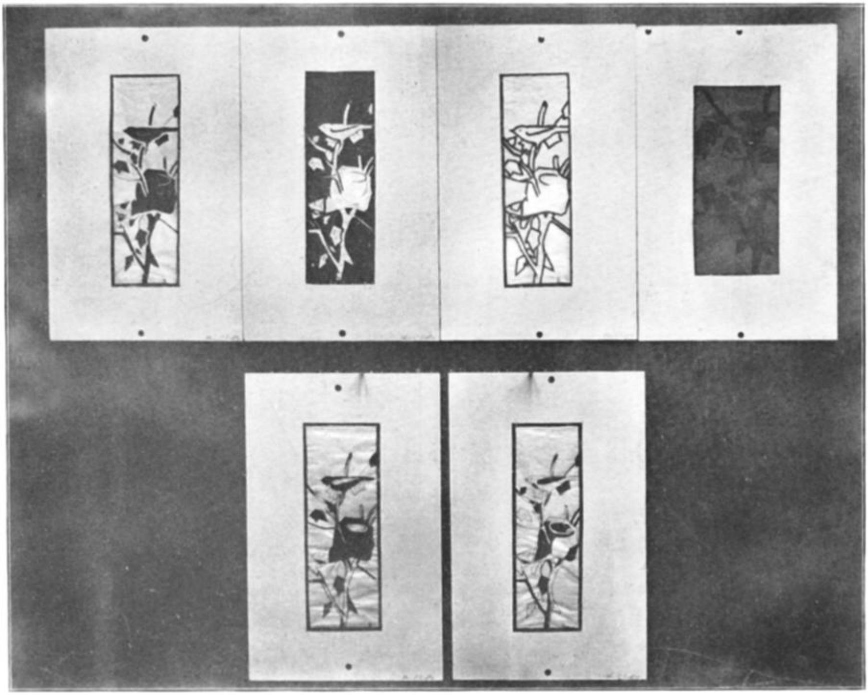

FIG. 5

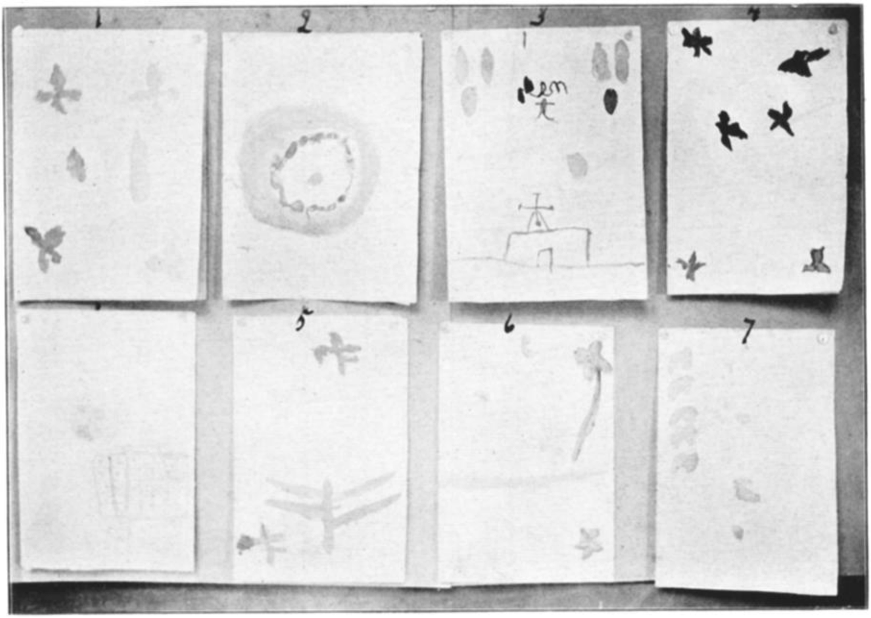

FIG. 6

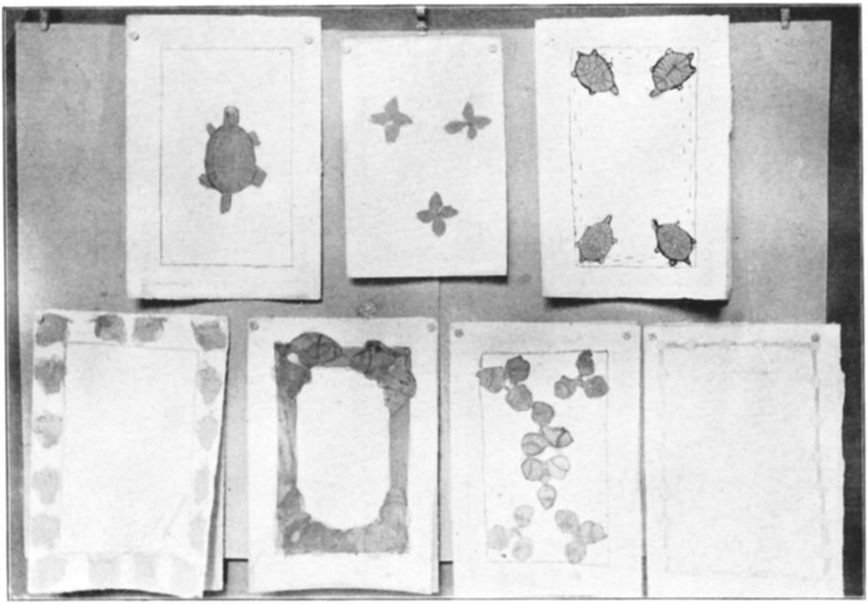

FIG. 7

make it one-sided he has placed the *T* below the letters *Den.* The lower part of the drawing he called a weather-vane. The balance of the spacing is very interesting to me. Nos. 6 and 7 are either entirely lacking in these elements, or the children failed tc carry out their original plans. No. 5 shows the flightiness of a young child's purposes. The tree on this cover was the reaction from the brush and a cake of bright color. He did not carry one set of interests through the half-hour period. Fig. 7 was the work of six-year-old children developed in the same way. Acorns, leaves, and a pet turtle figure in these designs.

Of course, I would not attempt to prove anything from such a limited number of examples, but only to indicate the direction in which investigation will do valuable service.

We would do a great injustice to our heritage from the workers in fields of so-called new education if we allowed ourselves to place undue emphasis upon the technical process. There is danger of our beginning to force upon children a lot of formal exercises in the name of æsthetic development. These may be just as isolated and foreign to his own real needs and experiences as were the type-blocks of twenty years ago. Let us question, therefore, the real interests out of which it may be possible legitimately to develop this control. The crafts seem to me to furnish one splendid initiative. They relate themselves normally to the child's life, and they furnish the very basis out of which, according to Mr. Fenollosa, the race has developed its art. In the development of decoration the attention is almost immediately fixed upon all of the spaces in any area to be decorated. If the problem is weaving stripes into a rug, it is not a question of stripes alone, but of the spaces into which the stripes are dividing the rug. The mind soon acquires the habit of noticing how particular things are cutting a certain space. When this habit is acquired, the individual, as we have seen, is a long way on in the development of real visual power.

A discussion of the development of adequate control through free pictorial expression opens up such large and fundamental educational questions that I prefer to reserve the subject, as a conclusion of this discussion, for another number of the magazine.